

## DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 435 995

CS 216 931

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TITLE Where Do American Family Names Come From?  
PUB DATE 1999-11-19  
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the National Council of Teachers of English (Denver, CO, November 18-23, 1999).  
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom - Teacher (052) -- Historical Materials (060) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)  
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
DESCRIPTORS \*Ethnic Origins; Etymology; \*Family (Sociological Unit); \*Genealogy; Higher Education; \*Information Sources; Secondary Education; \*Semantics  
IDENTIFIERS \*Ethnographic Semantics; Ethnohistory; \*Name Derivation

## ABSTRACT

This document presents a brief overview of the history and origins of mainly European family names from the 1100s forward, and is envisioned as a one class-period session for secondary or college English teachers and those interested in semantics. Sections included are history of naming, reasons for naming, guidelines for name origins, and special cases. Contains 4 references, a worksheet for matching names and origins, and a key to the worksheet. (EF)

## Where Do American Family Names Come From?

by Alton Barbour

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## WHERE DO AMERICAN FAMILY NAMES COME FROM?

Alton Barbour

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**ABSTRACT:** One of the most interesting of all etymologies is that of family names because everyone has had a family and virtually all family names have a history. This paper is a topical summary of the origin and development of family names from the 1100s forward and focuses mainly on European names. It explains how family names had practical origins and how they were derived and how they became hereditary. Some special cases are also discussed. This presentation, which is accompanied by an instrument (and key) for matching names and origins, is envisioned as a one class-period session for secondary school or community college English teachers, or as a supplement for higher education teachers interested in semantics.

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**A BRIEF DISCLAIMER:** Mainly in talking about how people in the United States got their last names, I will concern myself with what went on in Europe. I realize at the outset that this is ethnocentric because it leaves out so much of the rest of the world. But it is also practical and efficient because most of the people in the United States have names that came originally from Europe because that is where most of the immigration has come from. Even the Blacks in America, who came as slaves from Africa, tend to have European names that they assumed at the end of the Civil War. My experience is that even in numerous places outside of the United States, such as central and South America, the people generally have European names. I was struck by the fact that the largely Black population of Jamaica has voluntarily taken names that are English. Every Jamaican knows that the Spanish made them slaves and the English freed them, so there are no Spanish names in Jamaica, only English ones.

- I. **CHINA:** The Chinese were the first to have family names. There are some family names in China that go back 2000 years. This may be because the Chinese notion of a family is different from ours. Ours is generally the idea of a nuclear family of parents, children and close relatives. The Chinese idea of family involves generations of the family stretching back in history. So some Chinese names are very ancient, and they are very limited in number. This may be because there were far fewer people then or because different families chose the same name. Chinese is a language of one-syllable words and the names are all one syllable too. The basic idea though is that the way the names came about in China is how they later came about in Europe, so they have similar translations. In Tibet at the present time, the people still just have one name.
- II. **EUROPE AND THE CRUSADES:** Prior to the Crusades in Europe, people just had one name. They were simply called John (Ivan, Juan, Johannes) or Rachel or Rebecca or Elizabeth. It was after the Crusades that people began to feel the need for another name in addition to the one they had had since birth. (Naming day in Europe is similar to a birthday in the United States.) These first names are sometimes referred to ethnocentrically as "Christian" names which ignores all of those people who have them who are in no way Christian. A last name is usually referred to as a "surname" (Sur meaning over or above, from F from OF from Latin for supra.).

III. A RELIGIOUS WAR: The Crusades began in 1100 after the Diet (legislative assembly) at Worms (a city in western Germany) and continued for nearly 300 years. The stated objective was to drive the heathen (meaning the Muslims) from the "Holy Land" (meaning Palestine). In the meantime, the Muslims were trying to repel the infidel (meaning the Christians) from the land they had occupied since before 60 A.D. A secondary function was to reduce unemployment by giving the unemployed something to do. This was to act as soldiers or to provide logistical support for soldiers. Although the Crusades were temporarily successful, in the long run they were a failure. All we have to do to see that is to look at who now occupies the Gaza Strip, the Sinai, Lebanon, Syria, etc. and what their religion is to know who controls the land. Palestine is now Israel and is Jewish, but that had nothing to do with the Crusades.

A. SURNAMES: SINGLE TO DOUBLE: Through most of the Middle Ages all of the common people had one name and so did the nobility. The reason we call someone Henry the VI and Henry the V is because Henry was the only name he had. During the Crusades when people were away from home and in Asia and they met, they had to identify themselves to others. If they were asked, "Who are you?" they could reply where they had come from or if they were landowners, where they owned land:

"I am Charles of Sussex." "I am John from Kent." "I am William of York." "I am Mathew from Severn." "I am Charles of Northampton."

B. PRESTIGE: This was an additional name which spoke of uniqueness, value or importance. An added name had prestige as well as a practical value. When the Crusaders returned home from the wars with these additional names, the upper classes who had remained at home followed suit and also chose names. The second name was a status symbol which eventually trickled down

C. RECORDKEEPING: Names also aided in recordkeeping. If the clerks (a job which later became a last name, Clark) for big estates noted the payment of fines or taxes given to the nobles by the serfs, they needed a way to distinguish between one Robert who had paid taxes and another Robert who hadn't. But it didn't do much good for the clerk to ask what other names the serf possessed because he didn't have any. Nor had he even thought about it. So what the clerk did was to give the name a description of his own. The earliest names given to people were not names they had given themselves or that they called themselves.

Names originated as descriptions of the person for purposes of better identification. They were intended to identify the individual and were not intended to apply to whole families. Secondly, they were not hereditary. They were not to be passed on. They were descriptive of the person to whom they were applied. Although originally the name did not pass from mother to daughter or father to son, they eventually began to, but that took several centuries.

The very earliest descriptive names assigned by clerks to individuals were combinations of prepositions and places which described where the person lived. These were such names as Hill, Lake, Bush, Pond, Ford, Forest, or Wood, but with an added prefix of a preposition.

So they sounded like: Underwood, Atwater, Dufield, Atterbury, Delboys (at the wood), Butaport (outside the gate) Debedford (from a specific ford named Bed). This was after the Norman Conquest of 1066, so many documents were written in Latin and some prepositions or forms were Anglo-Saxon, some were Latin and some were French. Dupont means "at the bridge." Lobello means "beautiful person." There were also nicknames meant to ridicule or to compliment or simply to identify such as Little John or Long John or Stout John or Cruickshanks John. The name which remains now (such as Little or Lang or Stout) is what was once the adjective that described the person.

- IV. HEREDITARY SURNAMES IN EUROPE: In what is now Italy the nobility of Venice were the first to have a hereditary surname system. Although there were not actually countries at this time, the nobility in what eventually became countries followed suit. In England the nobility had names by the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. In France it was a little sooner and in Germany a little later. Many family names became hereditary in fairly recent times (within the past 150 years) in Norway, Sweden, Turkey, the mountainous districts in Wales and Scotland, and among Germanic and Slavic Jews.

How did they become hereditary? How when one person had a last name did that person come to pass that name on to someone else? In most European countries names became hereditary first among landowners and nobles. Since so many of the names came from the lands that they owned, when the son inherited the land, it became the custom to inherit the name along with the land. Among the lower classes and tradespeople, since the son generally learned from and followed the trade of the father, the same occupational name could be applied to the son as had been applied to the father. The occupational name could be said to having been inherited only when the son followed a different trade, but was still known by the same surname as the father.

- V. HOW WERE NAMES DERIVED?: Even today, if you had to identify a person whose last name you didn't know, how would you go about it? Most likely you would mention where the person lived, where the person had come from, what the person did for a living, who the person's family or ancestors were, or the person's most prominent or most obvious physical characteristics. And that is how the Europeans did it too. Practically all European family names (in whatever languages or cultures) were derived from the person's place of residence, past or present, the person's occupation, from the mother's or father's name, or from a descriptive nickname.

- A. RESIDENCE: Almost every village or town in Europe since the Middle Ages has served to name the families who had lived there and then moved. If a man lived in a town, he wouldn't be known by the name of the town, because everyone else lived there too and would have the same name. It wouldn't serve to identify him. But if this same man left his village and went elsewhere, the people in the new village might identify him by the name of the village he had come from or the land he had formerly lived on. ("Ah, you are from the village of Pietro, so now you are Gino de Pietro.") In many cases the place that gave rise to the family name can no longer be found on a map because it no longer exists. Sometimes the spelling has changed. Some of the place names in Europe are so ancient that their origins have been lost. Why do we call the artist Leonardo DaVinci? It was because his name was Leonardo and he

was from the town of Vinci and lived in Florence. Why do we call the famous Spanish artist El Greco? Because that is what the Spanish called him. They called him, "the Greek."

Some had the name of the manor because they owned it, but very few are descended from the owner of the manor. The majority are descended from those who lived in the village. One might acquire a surname from living at or near a place. This is particularly true of topological features. When people lived closer to the soil, as they did during the Middle Ages, they were acutely aware of variations of landscape or countryside. Every field or plot was identified by a descriptive term. If a man lived near a hill or mountain, he might receive that as a family name. For example, all of the following names mean "hill."

Maki from Finland  
Dumont or Depew from France  
Zola from Italy  
Jurek from Poland  
Kopecky from Czechoslovakia  
Hill from England

Dwelling at a lake or stream or brook or river would distinguish a person from someone else who lived farther from water, so they became common names in almost every country.

Jarvi from Finland  
Kuhl from Germany  
Loch from Scotland  
Pond, Pool, Leake, Lynn, and Lake, all from England

Strom from Sweden  
Potocki from Poland  
Joki from Finland  
Rio or Riviera from Spain  
Brooks or Rivers from England

There were also the names from woods, stones, plains, fields, swamps, moors, bogs, enclosures or fenced in places, and various trees. Fords were common at this time because there were so few bridges. Today we live in towns or cities where streets are named and houses are numbered, so we have little use for topological features. If we didn't have street names and house numbers, we would be using as directions the features of the land. These places are often identified with the endings of names.

Shire means a homestead where one family resides  
Hope means a piece of enclosed land  
Leah or Lea means an open place or meadow  
Ton or don means a village or town  
Ham comes from the German for home and means one home  
or even a few homes

How does a person from England get to be called Lyons when there are no lions in England or even in Europe? Often people took their names from public buildings because they lived near an inn or public place such as a court or a hall. Since very few people could read at this time, public law required that places of business have signs which were pictures. The red and white barber pole, which represents lather and blood, is ancient. Greeks and Romans identified buildings in the same way. If a person lived near a building with a distinctive identifier, that might end up being the name he/she was called. Taverns and inns often had names of animals such as duck, drake, cock, bull, fish or swan, and sometimes the names of animals that were not local such as lion or tiger, and sometimes animals that were nonexistent such as dragon or unicorn. However, the building which gave name to a family may have long disappeared.

- B. **OCCUPATION:** To describe a person by his/her occupation is natural. We often do it now. The most common occupational surnames were not necessarily the most common occupations. When most men were farmers or fishermen, those names wouldn't distinguish one man from another very well. However, if the fisher moved inland or the farmer moved among shepherds or the shepherd moved among fishers, the name would be useful.

Most of the occupations or professions reflected in family names are from small towns or villages in the Middle Ages. In those days nearly everyone in Europe lived in or near villages. Even the cities would seem small to us now. In every village, no matter how small, however, there would be a certain number of people with certain necessary skills. One was that in the town there had to be a metalworker or blacksmith.

Kovac in Bulgaria  
Smed in Denmark  
Kovars in Hungaria  
Lefevre or Faure in France  
Schmidt or Smidt in Germany  
Kuznetzov in Russia  
Kowal in Poland  
Fiero in Italy

In addition, every village had to have a carpenter, a mason, a hunter, a miller, a barber, a baker, a cook, a taylor, a shoemaker, a fletcher, a bowman, a weaver, a cooper, a chandler, a fowler, a wheelwright (and any other variety of wrights) a shepherd, a hayward, a bailiff, a sheriff, a steward, a parker, etc. The Ian Fleming character, Bond ("James Bond") would have had ancestors who were peasant proprietors, householders or tillers of the soil under binding obligation to someone else. There were clergy present (usually some one who could read and write) who were not expected to be celibate, and who looked after the religious life of the village. Charlie Chaplin was descended from one of them. Caplan or Kaplan is a variation.

- C. **PATRONYMICS AND MATRONYMICS:** In this unenlightened time there was more patro than matro, but there are family names derived from both so both need mention. Some of these are fairly obvious such as Jackson, Williamson, Johansen, O'Connor, Macdougall,

Fitzpatrick, Owens and Johns. The matronymics would include such names as Nelson, Babson, Dotson, and Madison. Some names were taken directly such as George or Thomas. A great number of names in western countries have some kind of patronymic or matronymic beginning or ending.

Son in English  
Sen in Danish or Norwegian  
Ian in Armenian  
Nen in Finnish  
Pulos in Greek  
Wiecz in Polish  
Ez in Spanish

Also

Mac in Scots or Irish  
Fitz in Norman French  
Ap in Welsh  
O' in Irish means grandson

Many of these prefixes have been dropped. Other terminations of family names are diminutive endings. These are common among French, German, Irish, Spanish, and Italian names. Some names were shortened such as Clem for Clement or Will for William or Abe for Abraham. There are numerous versions of important biblical names such as John, Peter, Paul, James, Simon, Michael and Thomas in every country in Europe.

D. DESCRIPTIVE NICKNAME: If a person were unusually tall or short or fat or thin or fast or slow, that fact would be noted and used to describe him/her. Even today, strangers will call a red haired person "red." Such a descriptive nickname might be added to the forename and become a surname. Reed, Reid, Read, Ruff, Russ, Russell, or Ruddy are all common in England. The Irish name Flynn means red haired. It would be Rossi in Italy, Rousseau or Larouse in France, or Roth in Germany. There are names calling attention to light or dark complexions such as Weiss or Braun. There are names of animals such as Baer for bear, Haas or Cooney for hare, Zorro, Fuchs, Voss, Todd, Liska, Liss, Volpe or Colfax for fox. There is Ulf for wolf, Vogel for bird, and variety of others.

#### E. SPECIAL CASES:

1. Borrowed names: If a family had a name they didn't want and there was an opportunity to change it, they might. They might call themselves by a preferred name and they might have it changed legally. For example if the name was Tatarski and they found that Poles were discriminated against, they might change it to something close to what the name would be in English, or Hartman. A number of names have been changed to make for easier pronunciations or to "anglicize" them.

Roggenfelder (Dutch) becomes Rockefeller  
Deitz (German) becomes Deeds  
Mueller (German) becomes Miller  
Schmidt (German) becomes Smith

A name that came to England from France in 1066 such as Beaumont, becomes eventually an English name rather than a French name. A Polish name that migrated to Germany becomes eventually a German name. Names in one language spill over into another language. If a dozen people in England all have the same name, Brody, it is likely three or four of the dozen are from a nationality other than English.

2. Jewish names: Many Jewish names are of relatively recent origin and are artificial, meaning "made up" or given and taken. In Europe, many Jews did not have surnames until they were required by law (in the late 1800s and early 1900s) to have them. It was mainly for record keeping and bureaucratic efficiency. Their original names were family histories. The individual name might be something like Levi, son of Benjamin the Hazzan, son of David, son of Rabbi Judah, son of Rebecka Tzibbur. This was too difficult and cumbersome for officials. The Jews were persecuted and had very little status. Ultimately, they were required by officials to take new names. If they didn't take names, they were given insulting names such as Grosskopf. So, they shortened their existing names into names such as Cohen, Levy, Brill, Bardah, Shatz or Segal. Or they took names from nature such as Greenblat, Rosen, Rosenbloom, Rosenthal, Goldberg, or Greenberg.

3. Slave names: Because of our ethnocentrism, we tend to believe that slavery existed only here in the United States, but slavery has existed as long as there has been war. That is what frequently happened to the conquered people. Those who weren't killed became slaves. There is slavery now in the Sudan. Much of the prostitution in the Pacific Rim is slavery. In this hemisphere in the Caribbean and Central and South America, slavery existed from the moment the Spanish landed and found that there was gold to be mined. The Aztecs ended up mining gold for Isabella instead of Montezuma. All of the African slaves entering into this continent came from the Ivory or Gold Coast of West Africa.

Here, whatever African name they originally had was ignored. They were assigned a name, but only one. Then they were called by their first name because it was the only one they had. They were Sally or Bessie or Jack or Beulah or Bill or Suzan. Nothing African. When the Civil War was over, they were a population of people with one name in a land in which everyone had two names but them. For most of them, depending on when they came over, their original or African name was lost forever. They had to choose from what was available and most of them chose European names. It is a myth that they were happy darkies and took the names of the people who owned them. They rejected those names and took names that were attractive to them. If they were Christians they might take biblical names. Some took prominent names such as Washington, Lincoln, Jefferson, Franklin, Hamilton, Adams, or Madison. It seems that they all became wide receivers or defensive backs. You may

have noticed than many chose the name Brown after John Brown. The name selection was deliberate. They knew what they were doing.

4. Native American or Indian names: These names vary with the tribes, but are generally taken from nature. At the time of the arrival of Europeans into this continent, the indigenous people didn't have family names such as surnames which were passed on in a hereditary fashion. But they did have a tribal identity because the tribe was a collection of families around a patriarch much like a Scottish clan. In this way the tribe was an extended family of as many as several hundred. The family didn't need to be identified with a name because everyone in the tribe knew who the family was. But with the invasion of Europeans, eventually the Indians ended up on reservations and needed more than just a clan name. Some took European names. Some took family names emblematic of their culture and traditions. Some names are a combination of both. The traditional names are mainly descriptive, so unlike European names which are all nouns, the Indian names commonly included verbs and adjectives. These would be such names as Big Crow, War Lance, Laughing Coyote, Swift Pony, Jumping Dog, Thunder Cloud, Silent Doe, Running Fox, Wild Elk, and Red Tailed Hawk.

So the answer to the question of where did American family names come from is that first of all, for the great majority, they came from Europe. Secondly, they were derived four basic ways. People were named based on where they lived, what they did for a living, who their parents were and from nicknames which identified distinguishing characteristics. And that there are some exceptions to the rule. This is changing slightly and gradually as immigrants arrive from Asia and keep their Asian names or as Blacks in America choose African names. For most of us however, our name is a clue to our family history, and that history is usually a humble beginning in a European village nearly a thousand years ago.

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Alton Barbour  
University of Denver

WHAT DID THESE NAMES COME FROM?

Instructions: Try to match these family names with their sources or origins. Pay attention to the sounds of the words and use your own common sense in making connections.

| ANSWERS | NAMES                   | SOURCES OR ORIGINS                    |
|---------|-------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| _____   | 1. FOWLER (Eng.)        | A. A priest                           |
| -----   | 2. GOLDBERG (Ger.)      | B. Son of the warrior                 |
| -----   | 3. DICKSON (Eng.)       | C. Dweller along a coast              |
| -----   | 4. COLLIER (Eng.)       | D. A clergyman                        |
| -----   | 5. FOSTER (Eng.)        | E. Son of Arthur                      |
| -----   | 6. JOKI (Finn.)         | F. A woodworker                       |
| -----   | 7. HICKS (Eng.)         | G. An ironworker                      |
| -----   | 8. LARSON (Scand.)      | H. Haircutter, surgeon                |
| -----   | 9. MERTEN (Ger.)        | I. Someone born at Easter             |
| -----   | 10. RITCHIE (Eng.)      | J. Person from a place of bears       |
| -----   | 11. ALT or ALTER (Ger.) | K. Dweller near a grove or forest     |
| -----   | 12. BRUHN, BRAUN (Ger.) | L. Son of Barbara                     |
| _____   | 13. CHAN (Chin.)        | M. Son of Richard                     |
| -----   | 14. CHANDLER (Eng.)     | N. A person from gold mountain        |
| -----   | 15. DRAKE (Eng.)        | O. A bird catcher                     |
| -----   | 16. MOORE (Eng.)        | P. One who worked in coal             |
| -----   | 17. ROUNDS (Eng.)       | Q. A forest warden                    |
| -----   | 18. DIMAGGIO (It.)      | R. Dweller near a river               |
| -----   | 19. CHESTER (Eng.)      | S. Son of Richard                     |
| -----   | 20. HARTMAN (Ger.)      | T. Dweller near gold mountain         |
| -----   | 21. PAPPAS (Gr.)        | U. A pet form of Mars, the God of war |
| -----   | 22. LONGO (It.)         | V. Descendent of little Richard       |

|       |     |                        |                                                 |
|-------|-----|------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| ----- | 23. | DACOSTA (It.)          | W. Older than another                           |
| ----- | 24. | CHAPLIN (Eng.)         | X. A plump man                                  |
| ----- | 25. | MACARTHUR (Ir., Scot.) | Y. One who made candles                         |
| ----- | 26. | EISENHOWER (Ger.)      | Z. Dweller at the sign of the<br>dragon or duck |
| ----- | 27. | JOINER (Eng.)          | AA. Dweller near a marsh                        |
| ----- | 28. | BARBOUR (Eng., Scot.)  | BB. A dark complexioned person                  |
| ----- | 29. | ASTOR (Eng.)           | CC. Born in month of May                        |
| ----- | 30. | BERN (Ger.)            | DD. One from a walled town                      |
| ----- | 31. | WOOD (Eng.)            | EE. A strong man                                |
| ----- | 32. | BABBS, BABBITT (Eng.)  | FF. A teacher                                   |
| ----- | 33. | SHANNON (Ir.)          | GG. Old person                                  |
| ----- | 34. | FU (Chin.)             | HH. Grandson of little Seanach                  |

# KEY I.

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| -----   | 20. HARTMAN (Ger.)      | EE. A strong man                                |
| -----   | 21. PAPPAS (Gr.)        | A. A priest                                     |
| -----   | 22. LONGO (It.)         | B. A tall man                                   |

## 2.

|       |     |                        |                                   |
|-------|-----|------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| ----- | 23. | DACOSTA (It.)          | C. Dweller along a coast          |
| ----- | 24. | CHAPLIN (Eng.)         | D. A clergyman                    |
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